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G. H. Levine : l'excellent, non petit!

A CONTRIBUTION TO A POSSIBLE DEFINITION OF MUSEOLOGY

"There is only a single thing I consider unacceptable, namely the views that museum activities do not need any theoretical basis."

These are the words of Mr. Josef Beneš taken from the latest issue of the MuWoP. I am quoting here Mr. Beneš at the very beginning of my contribution to the debate on the nature and situation of museology since the above quotation clearly states the need for museology as a scientific discipline, and at the same time it illustrates to what extent is museology an issue open to discussion. Both points are true and contain far-reaching consequences.

Without any intention to underestimate the efforts of the MuWoP, but to the contrary - I consider it a pleasant surprise to witness such a response and commitment of theoreticians on museology who have submitted their papers. The very fact points out most of all to the need of a definitive definition of museology and of the necessity to finally establish its status. A variety of differing opinions on the subject falling mainly into three categories (from a negation of its existence to declaring it only a practical activity, and describing it as a science) - is symptomatic to the effect that, no matter what the particular opinions are, they clearly indicate that we are still far from a possible solution to the problem. Thus in addition to conflicting opinions (and I may add also conflicting views of the problem) there is present an obvious fact that even among relatively close minds there is no distinct common denominator basis to create a compact theoretical system.

In other words, there is a discord and a disproportion between a ready and numerous response on the one hand, and the results of the common effort on the other. Obviously something is amiss, and I shall venture to say that we cannot be far from the truth if we say that neither the premises nor the aims of various participants in the debate have been identical. Moreover, they are sometimes conflicting to such a degree that we actually talk of different things. May I permit myself

a comparison to say that like the science of religion, the museology nowadays is in the stage of prophets. Only one thing is certain: somewhere in the future individual witnessings and annunciations will merge into a compact system, such as it will be possible to teach in the same way anywhere in the world.

The efforts of the MuWoP in the latest two issues, to direct the debate into distinct thematic groups, is a welcome attempt since it represents in itself a usable and, useless to say, necessary thesis which could surely be also opposed. The present debate clearly shows that, no matter to which thematic group they have been assigned, the contributing authors turn in their efforts within a constantly present central issue, i.e. the definition itself. The dilemma, whether museology is an intermediary discipline or not, is in my opinion non-existent, as some contributors have already said. It obviously has to be. Some authors have reduced consequently their efforts down to an attempt to locate these very relevant scientific disciplines and sciences where in their intersection it may be possible to establish the autonomous field of museology. It has been my personal impression that none of the contributing discussants has exhausted to the end all the possibilities, and precisely established the distinctive field of museology. And let me venture here two queries, i.e. it may be that museology neither can be defined, nor may it be necessary after all to define it for a reason or another.

A possible conclusion on the present situation concerning museology (as demonstrated by the debate in the MuWoP) may be that all the themes expounded could be considered as "contributions to a definition of museology". Those who have been dealing with museology for a considerable period of time and consequently wish to consider as resolved at least some of the elementary problems (definitions describing museology can be found after all in various encyclopaedias) may consider this falling back to initial queries as unnecessary and lacking seriousness, and possibly also a lack of respect for the labour already invested. Let me point out that it would be completely misunderstood for at least two reasons: (1) the present debate with its declared aim to establish the place of museology among other scientific disciplines and sciences mainly ends with establishing the fact that actual knowledge of the corpus itself

of museology is insufficient, i.e. it reinforces the need for a definition which will "legalize" certain opinions and invalidate others; and (2) the other reason could be found in the statement that museology by its very nature - and as it is not only the case with museology among recent scientific disciplines) - resists a firm and longlasting definition.

Since, however, by virtue of our logical mind, we cannot accept a lack of definition in something we want to use and to teach, we could, on a second thought, reach a conclusion where it could be envisaged a definition sufficiently broad and all-inclusive which will satisfy our need for definiteness but without adverse effects of limitation. Such a definition, however, could decisively affect the very premises of former attempts to a definition.

Provided that I have correctly understood Mrs. Ilse Jahn's contribution in the latest issue of the MuWoP, museology is today a fluctuating and indefinite number of scientific and practical ideas, still sticking to the body of their respective sciences and disciplines. In some future, museology will keep on all these ties but only as a system of references and links. It will represent an independent scientific discipline capable to contribute by its own means to the development of the scientific thought in those very sciences that once had contributed to the formation of museology. If that is so - could we say after all that museology exists?

I may be inclined to accept the statement that there exists a certain theoretico-practical corpus we call museology, however, we do not have, indeed, an exact definition of it, and there is no certainty that this corpus should be named just as we do.

I can gladly agree with Mrs. Spielbauer, who says that our insistence on official recognition of museology by the Academy could, in the long run only be to the detriment of it. Even unrecognized as it is, museology is, however, already present at universities in an extent comparable to its power. This process, certainly is still incomplete, but we should not hasten it up beyond the immanent possibilities of the museology itself. If it is a sin to say that museology has not yet

reached the stage of a science, it is a still greater sin to reduce it to a sum of practical knowledges, to a level of common sense and sets of norms taken from museal everyday practice. The prospects of museology, its significance, are far greater than the uncritical affirmatory judgement it presupposes, or the negators think of, as they contest it. When set upon genuine foundations, museology must demonstrate its far-reaching influence and its applicability as a "corrective" discipline. Among other similar phenomena in the field of science, it should satisfy a need for a holistic and a conceptual approach within its particular field of action.

At the beginning, which is not existent as a firm point, there was the idea. Slowly it has generated the museum, as a complete working procedure of a very particular character, and recognized world-wide by the majority of legal codes as being "of especial social interest". Museum has grown into a phenomenon possessing and requiring its proper "ideology". Due to a force of attraction possessed only by such powerful phenomena as the modern museum is - the gravity centre of theory has been moved into the domain of the museal practice.

The museal object is the basic unit of the museal working procedure, and the basic parameter determining the complete character of the said procedure. It is immanently of an intermediary character, and obligatory multivalent. Still it has been classified, according to the logic of its dominant characteristics, into various distinct institutions, which bear their names in accordance with the said general classification, i.e. various museal institutions have been formed to be in accordance with the scholarly classification of the object. Thus the museal object has become the basis of all that makes a museum, and consequently it has also determined the very character of the theory applied to the museal working procedure. It is therefore no wonder that some authors even in the MuWoP express opinions in favour of a presence of particular museologies. It would appear to them that a single theory can by no means "serve" in an adequate manner to such a difference of museal objects as an Ichtyosaurus skeleton and a painting by Van Gogh represent as much as the classification of

objects in itself is often rather strained, and makes an integral comprehension of the subject impossible (especially when we talk of the presentation), in the same way the suppositions of a presence of more than one museology is the result of the same false attitude. After all, the very possibility of its existence is put in jeopardy by that.

It is true that such a sticking to the object has brought into the field of museology a number of very useful, practical knowledges about the functioning of the museal working procedure, and under the pressure of a possible data mix-up there has been introduced a distinction between museology and museography - the latter taking over the function of practical application of theory, and the technique and technology of the museal procedure. Following such a division (along discussable lines anyway) there have been voiced opinions to the effect that either sections contain insufficient contents. A possible argument in favour of such a statement may be a significant number of instances world-wide where names of various studies and institutions confuse museology and museography, so that there is, indeed, no certainty that we are dealing with two distinct activities even when we use different names.

If we try to comprehend why this confusion of concepts, a possible interpretation imposing upon us is also the simplest one: we are dealing with one and the same discipline which has still to be considered as integral. Still a dissatisfaction remains, the very same one which has originally cause the split.

It may be that the misunderstanding and the source of confusion lies in the very attachment to the museum, fatally initiated by the attachment to the museal object. Museology is a rare one among theoretic disciplines so totally attached to the phenomenon of an institution, and its commitment to museum institution. In the post-war boom of museal institutions and other related activities it is, as we well know, only with considerable difficulty possible to apply the current definition of the museal institution. The museal activity has exceeded the frame-

work we dispose of for it. It is necessary to make an effort at a re-definition of it in the light of such new phenomena as nature parks, eco-museums, various forms of cultural centres - where every traditionalistic classification (not necessarily a traditional one) is at pains to define even such a basic problem as e.g. the nature of the museal object. New forms of museal activities are constantly springing up in practice responding to new social demands, and taking advantage of new possibilities of action provided by advances of contemporary communication technology. If we can orient ourselves today only with difficulty in the terminology and in the efforts to subject the present (and future) needs and practical forms of the museum activities to the now existent terminology and the theoretical arsenal, we may soon find ourselves even isolated in our own field.

As much as the idea of museum is too narrow nowadays to contain all the activities still inclusive within the field of an identical attitude towards the environment and the society, thus the discipline of museology is even clumsier fettered since it only repeats the very same limitation of the basic institution. We have so far often heard the statement, expressed in this or that way, to the effect that museology is a science of museum. If we, indeed, maintain such a close tie, both in terms of linguistics and of meaning, there would be more logic then in using the term museography. After all, though rather a long time ago, Nickelius was following the right road. What he had inaugurated with his instructions "how to correctly understand and usefully interpret the curio cabinet", he had named - not without proper reason - museography.

I am fully aware that a name is a matter of convention, and it is therefore necessary to determine the differences by defining the contents and the subject matter of an activity. In other words, to me it is indifferent whether the theory on functioning of the museum will be named museology or museography, but it is essential to establish what is contained within the agreed and logical compass of such a discipline. If we want, however, to cover all the new manifestations

(and also those evidently to come) which can be only with difficulty separated from the phenomenology of the museal activity, if we want to integrate the field of conservation and protection, now in rapid expansion - then we shall have to define a very large context, a vast field of activity beyond traditional restrictions of the museum, and it will be necessary and possible to assign it into the competence of a single and united scientific discipline. If we can agree that museography sufficiently determines the field of theory and practice of the museum institution, than we could enlarge the definition of museology to such an extent as to successfully handle the overall problems concerning the protection and the treatment of the total heritage. So that although I do not consider the terminology essential (from the moment when we know what is meant under a particular term) still I would heretically claim that we should not shrink even from introducing new concepts. Why not call such a broad concept of museology i.e. of a discipline which is no long museum-centred, by name of heritology. A science of heritage (heritage is an internationally accepted term to denote the sum total of that which has been inherited, Fr. patrimoine) by its very name and its contents would refer to a broad and integral perception of problems concerning our attitude towards the heritage. The museal activity and the museal working procedure in itself, though of greatest significance in that field, are, however, only a part of the overall problem of the heritage. The museal activity will remain for ever a specificum requiring a specific knowledge of and acquaintance with museal problems. As up to the present moment (but more at ease) it can remain in the competence of museography and/or museology. In other words, whether introducing new terms (I must admit I doubt the power of my suggestiveness) or re-defining the contents i.e. the subject matter and the field of action, it is essential to maintain our permanent presence in a changing world. Such a (shall we say) philosophical museology (capable of having powerful protagonists) would approach the problems of nature, civilization and culture from a fundamental and a universal standpoint, and it would be engaged in an effort of elucidating the ontic structure. Such a new museology should determine in a right manner its attitude towards the past and the present while bearing in mind the future aims. The

traditional museum was, with unavoidable exceptions, of a souvenir character, burdened with the idea of prestige and with a pharaonic complex. The reformed museum has aimed at becoming a memory of the society, to influence the world and to instruct it. The museum of the future, such as it is already under way, aims at realizing such a dynamic attitude towards both the present and the future, that it views the past as a source of a valuable inspiration towards a full commitment in the everyday life. The aim of such a museum (or better of such an attitude, since we do not talk now of museums only, at least not in the usual meaning of the term) is to create such a relationship between man and universe which will be a harmonious one, a relationship where the consciousness of it will turn into the conscience. Modern museum has been created in response to a need to establish the identity, and the development just now taking hold of museal institutions (and not only of them) is only an announcement of hardly fully envisaged significance of the problem of identity in the future. The attitude towards the heritage is growing into an existential problem of the humanity. Our responsibility is enormous.

Tomislav Šola  
Zagreb, October 1982.